

June XX, 2021

Dear Chairwoman Murray and Ranking Member Blunt:

As you begin to craft the Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services bill, we respectfully request that you provide the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund (PHSSEF) within the Office of the Secretary with significant funding to be used to establish a *COVID-19 and Pandemic Response Centers of Excellence Program*.

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered life as we know it. As of March 2021, there have been over 29.6 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the United States. According to a March 11, 2021 article from the Association of American Medical Colleges “Some patients have experienced heart damage; some have neurological issues such as memory loss and inability to focus; and an estimated 10% of COVID-19 patients, known as long-haulers, have persistent symptoms for weeks or months after initial infection. All of this is in addition to the typical respiratory symptoms that can send severe cases to the hospital.”

During these unprecedented times, academic medical centers have been at the forefront of our nation’s fight against COVID-19 by translating both expertise and on-the-ground experience into real-time development of knowledge and actionable measures that have filled in the gaps between a static preparedness plan and a novel virus outbreak.

Academic medical centers have been able to save the lives of patients due to their ability to develop and implement diagnostic testing and clinical care for the most complicated and critical medical cases. This is what academic medical centers are designed to do. In fact, much of the late-stage development of vaccines and other life-saving interventions like monoclonal antibody treatments were completed in partnership with academic medical centers. As witnessed over the past year, federal investments leveraging important partnerships between the federal government and healthcare entities is an efficient and effective model to combat public health threats and protect the wellbeing of all communities.

Founding a *COVID-19 and Pandemic Response Centers of Excellence Program* under the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) will build upon Congress’s efforts to combat COVID-19 and respond to future pandemics. Specifically, establishing this program will provide federal resources needed to support academic medical centers’ cutting-edge research, education, patient care, and community outreach as we continue to fight COVID-19 and respond to any other similar emerging threats.

Furthermore, accelerated SARS-CoV-2 mutations threaten our nation’s progress to defeat the COVID-19 crisis and uncertainty remains regarding future surges. A dynamic public-private network dedicated to expediting the real-time development of solutions to complex and concurrent evolving needs does not currently exist. We firmly believe that academic medical centers are uniquely positioned to be the bridge between stakeholders like government, academia, public health, health care, and private industry, while integrating the needs of their local communities including the most vulnerable and underserved. Academic medical centers serve as the nexus for

innovation and implementation, and federal resources can ensure we fully combat the known and emerging public health ramifications of this widespread crisis and be positioned for better coordination of real-time response needs of the next.

For these reasons, we urge you to appropriate significant funding to the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund (PHSSEF) to be used to establish a *COVID-19 and Pandemic Response Centers of Excellence Program*. We will be requesting, as well, that you include the following language in the Committee's FY 2022 report:

“Centers of Excellence. – The Committee understands that despite unprecedented efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic, many questions remain about the SARS-COV-2 virus and its variants. The Committee supports the establishment of a COVID-19 and Pandemic Response Centers Of Excellence Program Fund, and provides a \$100 million increase to the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund for this purpose. The Committee directs the Secretary or his designee to solicit applications and award cooperative agreements of not less than \$10,000,000 to at least 10 academic medical centers for ongoing needs related to COVID-19 and future pandemic preparedness and real-time response efforts including availability and accessibility of testing and diagnostics; short-term and long-term patient care for COVID-19 survivors; mental health services for frontline healthcare workers and other most impacted by COVID including patients and family members; best practices in the use of supplies and therapeutics; collaborations with public health entities addressing health equity and health care disparities; pre-clinical and clinical research and development; early warning and surveillance including One Health principles and genetic sequencing; and education and training for health professionals, scientists, and communities. The Committee understands that an academic medical center is further defined as an institution with integrated health care delivery, medical education and training, basic, clinical, translational, and implementation research operations, and other criteria as the Secretary may establish. The Committee encourages the Secretary to establish and convene not less than twice annually an advisory group made up of the representatives of the Centers of Excellence and relevant agency appointees to provide reports deemed necessary by the Secretary.”

Thank you for your strong support and leadership to address COVID-19 and for considering our request.

Sincerely,

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Bill Cassidy, M.D.
United States Senator